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NEWS RELEASE

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Gem County Bird Tests Positive for West Nile Virus

A crow in Gem County has tested positive for the West Nile virus. This is the first evidence of West Nile virus in Gem County this year. Canyon, Gooding and Owyhee counties also have reported West Nile activity during the past two weeks.

“We experienced West Nile virus activity in Gem County last year, knowing it was only a matter of time before we began seeing evidence of the virus again in 2005,” says Dr. Leslie Tengelsen, Deputy State Epidemiologist for the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare. “It is very important for people to take precautions to protect their health and fight the bite of mosquitoes that spread West Nile virus.”

West Nile virus was first discovered in the United States in 1999 in the New York City area. Since then, the virus has spread westward and can be found throughout the country. Last year, 11 of Idaho’s 44 counties reported West Nile activity, including an alpaca in Gem County last September.

To protect themselves, Tengelsen advises people to:

- Insect-proof their homes by repairing or replacing screens;
- Reduce standing water on their property that provides mosquito breeding habitat, such as bird baths and decorative ponds;
- Cover up exposed skin when outdoors;

(more)

- Apply insect repellent approved by the EPA to exposed skin and clothing. Follow instructions on the product label, especially for children;
- Avoid mosquitoes when they are most active at dawn and dusk; and
- Report dead birds to your local Fish and Game office.

“About 80 percent of people who are bitten by an infected mosquito will not become sick, but others may experience a mild, flu-like illness that can include headaches, body aches and a mild fever,” Tengelsen says. “Occasionally, the virus can lead to serious illness that requires hospitalization, especially in people over the age of 50.”

West Nile virus does not appear to affect most animals including dogs and cats, but can cause severe illness in horses and certain species of birds. People who discover dead birds, especially ravens, magpies, crows, raptors and jays, are encouraged to call their local Idaho Fish and Game office for possible testing. People with questions about the illness in horses should contact their veterinarian and make sure that their horses are vaccinated.

Additional information about the virus is available from the Department of Health and Welfare’s web site at <http://www.westnile.idaho.gov>. The Idaho State Department of Agriculture’s Urban Pest Management program also has information available on steps to prevent home-grown mosquito infestations. Information is available on ISDA’s web site at <http://www.idahoag.us>.

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(Editors: For information about West Nile virus, please contact Tom Shanahan, Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, 334-0668, or Laurie Boston, Southwest District Health, 455-5325.)